

MORNING PRAYER
SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY
01.14.24

Today's Second Lesson is about evangelism. It is the story of one man who came to faith in Christ through the efforts of a friend. That's the primary way in which the Gospel has always been spread.

Sure, there are great evangelists like Billy Graham who reach thousands of people at a time with the good news of salvation. But even then, it takes the work of many people bringing their friends into the stadium to hear the word. That's basically what Phillip did. He invited his friend to come and see for himself what Philip was so excited about.

Notice what Phillip said: "We have found him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote." He does not say, "I have found him." He says, "We have found him." Philip is not speaking for himself. He is speaking in behalf of the Church. He is offering the experience of a still very small community of believers, and he is inviting his friend to investigate that community.

From time to time, I hear people object to the use of the plural in the Nicene Creed. They say, "I know what I believe, but I don't know what all these other people here believe. I can't speak for them. I can only speak for myself." My response to that has been, "Do you really think you're the only one who believes this? Do you think you figured out this theology all by yourself? Don't you realize that when you say 'we believe' you are placing yourself in the company of millions who have confessed that faith throughout the ages in every language all over the world, and millions more who are confessing that faith today even as we speak? You are not alone – you are never alone – when you confess the Faith of the Church."

You need to remember that whenever you speak to someone about Jesus.

Nathaniel's reaction was a negative one: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Well, before I get to Phillip's way of responding to that cynical attitude, let me speculate on what may have been behind it.

Nathaniel lived near Nazareth, and his experiences with that town had not been especially pleasant. Maybe he found the people inhospitable. Maybe they were too preoccupied with their own petty agendas to think about, much less talk about, some of the great issues of life. Maybe they were so suspicious of anything unfamiliar that an inquisitive person like Nathaniel simply found them boring. In any event, Nazareth did not seem like the kind of place that would produce a Messiah for Israel.

Our Lord Himself had a negative experience in Nazareth. Listen to this passage from St. Mark's Gospel:

"And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue and many who heard him were astonished saying, 'Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country and among his own kin, and in his own house.' And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief."

There are many people who have had bad experiences with particular churches and particular clergy and particular theologies. It does no good to argue with such people or to try to talk them out of their prejudices. The only thing to do is exactly what Philip did. He said, "Come and see."

That's the heart of the matter. That's how successful evangelism works. We do not argue people into anything or out of anything; we simply invite them to share the experience of meeting Christ personally. We invite them to the place where we have met Him and where we continue to meet Him, which is right here. But I have to insert an immediate word of caution. We have to be very sure that what we are inviting people to come and see is indeed the Christ.

No building, however beautiful or historic, can bring about salvation. No music, however inspiring and uplifting, can forgive sins or overcome death. No preacher, however learned or eloquent, can talk anyone into a state of grace.

A parish may have popular programs and some friendly and interesting people, but neither of these can restore the distorted image of God. Only Christ has the power do that, and ultimately He is all we have to offer.

The place to meet Christ is in the fellowship of His body, the Church. Christ comes to us in the Sacraments and in the word truly proclaimed and taught. Music and liturgy and art and architecture play their part in pointing to Christ and helping us approach Him. But let none of those vehicles become an end in itself. When we say, "Come and see", we have to be sure that it is Christ Himself who will be seen when people come here.

You see, it was not really Phillip who brought his friend to faith. It was Jesus Himself.

When Jesus confronted Nathaniel, He read his heart and his character and his aspirations so perfectly that Nathaniel was convinced he had at last found a man he could follow. That was a start. But Jesus promised to lead him much deeper than that. He likened himself to Jacob's ladder on whom the angels ascended and descended, carrying God's word to the world and carrying the prayers of the faithful to the Father. He declared Himself to be the link between heaven and earth, the way to the Father, the great Mediator between God and man.

So the question we must ask ourselves is this: What will people see when they come among us? Will they see Jesus at work in our midst? Will people see a significant difference between life among us and life in the secular world? Will they see this Jesus in our relationships with each other? Will they see Him in our devotion to prayer and the breaking of bread and the teaching of the Apostles? Will they see Him in our willingness to sacrifice personal comfort for the sake of others? Will they see Him in our humility and our obedience and our discipline and our priorities and the way we make decisions? Will they see that it is through Him that we perceive the will of God and offer our prayers to the Father?

I can tell you this. Christ will not be seen where personal agendas and rivalries are allowed to flourish. Christ will not be seen where pride and self-centeredness are unopposed. Christ will not be seen where immorality and self-indulgence are accepted as normal. Christ will not be seen where gossip is tolerated.

Many people are turned off by the church, and rightly so, when they sense an attitude of smug superiority, but if they see that we acknowledge our sins and are struggling to amend them, people will respect us, because they will see Christ at work in us.

Jesus does not expect us to do for people what only He can do. But he does expect us to do what Philip did and bring people into His presence. He expects us to testify as Philip did to Nathaniel: “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.” And when the reply comes back, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”, we have to be ready to say with confidence, “Come and see.”

Let us Pray

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears, may, through thy grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts, that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honour and praise of they Name and the spreading of the Good News of salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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